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Equestrian Sport at the Olympic Games from 1900 to 1948

Donna de Haan & Lucy Claire Dumbell

Olympic equestrian sport have to date evolved through three distinct phases of development. The genesis of equestrian sport in the modern Olympics began in 1900 and was predominantly shaped by military influences until 1948. Pre-1900 equestrian sport existed in various forms around the world primarily to develop and practice skills of hunting and warfare. At this time equestrian sport lacked governance and internationally standardized rules. This paper's aim was to explore the influence of the military on the first phase of equestrian sport development in the Olympic Games between 1900 and 1948 with regards to their format and rules. Through thematic analysis of the narratives evident in the literature we highlight influential military developments / changes that occurred outside the confines of sport, and place the socio-cultural development of equestrianism within this framework. This reconstructive approach has enabled us to highlight the relevance of the military influence on the development of equestrian sport. Through the identification and analysis of perceptions of Olympic equestrianism, which are centred upon the Eurocentric, military-influenced development of the sport, the paper also discusses implicit and explicit references to, and the relevance of, masculinity elitism and social class, along with issues of amateurism and professionalism.

Keywords: equestrian, Olympics, military, sport development, horse

Introduction

The analysis presented in this paper is based on a review of major published sources, drawn from the principal English language sport history and sport policy focussed journals, wider literature, documentary material, including official Olympic reports, and internet sources such as those associated with the sport governing bodies. Review of the

available literature shows that, despite the fact that equestrian sports have had a presence at the summer Olympic Games since 1900, to date they have been largely overlooked by sports historians in academic literature.¹ Secondary analysis of the literature has led us to identify three distinct phases in the historical development of equestrian sport at the Olympics. The genesis of equestrian sport in the modern Olympics began in 1900 and was predominantly shaped by military influence until 1948. The second period of development began in 1952 and was characterised by the inclusion of non-military and female riders. More recently the amount of scholarship in the field of gender relations in equestrian sports during the second half of the twentieth century has grown and shed valuable light upon the gendered distribution patterns both within and outside Olympic Equestrian competition.² Finally the Barcelona Games of 1992 triggered a tremendous increase in sport specific research focussed on performance and welfare concerns of horse and riders alike and consequently heralded the third phase in the development of equestrian sport at the Olympics as changes were made to the format and structure of the sport.³

There are many aspects of equestrian sport* which make it unique, for example the relationship between athlete and animal, and the combination of individual and team dynamics. Within equestrian sports the fact that men and women can compete on an equal footing across a very wide age range, is a *prima facie* example of equality rarely found in other sporting disciplines.⁴ Despite this equestrian sports have been cited as contexts that epitomise social inequality, elitism and over-reliance on expensive tools (i.e. the horses) that many feel contribute more to competitive success than the skills and competences of the human athlete.⁵ However, there is little evidence of a sustained effort to understand the development of, and participation in, equestrian sport, and of the social context of equestrian sporting disciplines.⁶

To understand the modern context of this sport it is important to first examine their historical evolution, acknowledging that the shape of contemporary Olympic equestrian sport has been influenced by events and decisions in the earlier development

* Although equestrian sport is commonly used for all disciplines that involve horse and human (e.g. carriage driving, reining, horse racing), for the purposes of this article equestrian sport will be used for Olympic disciplines (currently dressage, showjumping and dressage) only unless otherwise specified.

of the sport. This paper therefore aims first, to review the socio-historical context of the development of Olympic equestrian sport, with a particular reference to the significance of warfare, and subsequently to explain the changing nature of equestrian sports at the Olympics, with a specific focus on the recognised but under-examined military influence on the format and rules of these Olympic sports between 1900 and 1948.

Due to the fact that relatively little has been written on the subject of Olympic equestrian sport, one is reliant on stakeholders within the system including members of organisations such as national and international governing bodies to provide detail and background information and invariably these will produce selective accounts which reflect particular interests as individuals construct the history of the sport.

Acknowledgement of such factors is reflected in the methodological underpinning of the study reported here. This paper draws in methodological terms on the distinction developed by Munslow⁷ and promoted in relation to sports history by Booth⁸ which distinguishes three types of approach to historical analysis. The first, and most consistently deployed within this paper, is described as *reconstruction* in which the primary aim of the historian is to reconstruct the ‘facts’ of history. This implies an objectivist ontology, in which a positivist approach in epistemological terms is adopted to acquire knowledge of the underlying reality. The second approach is *constructivist* in which the historian seeks to construct explanation from a particular perspective or set of perspectives. This is associated with a subjectivist ontological approach seeking to understand how particular world views construct, and are constructed by, the subjective understandings and constructions of historical actors and commentators, and thus an interpretive epistemological strategy is associated with this approach. The third approach identified by Munslow he terms *deconstruction* in which the approach adopted is to analyse the ways in which particular representations of ‘what has happened’ are constructed discursively and rhetorically, and carry implications for the promotion of the interests of some groups and the suppression of others.

This paper draws on aspects of all three of these approaches in acknowledging and analysing themes identified in the literature. We identify ways in which accounts of reality are reconstructed, and wish to draw our own realist conclusions about which events have occurred, and their proximate causes. Nevertheless we are also seeking, in drawing on the literature, to consider ways in which different commentators construct the world through their own accounts of events and of their significance. Finally we wish also to engage in deconstruction in the sense of identifying ways in which particular accounts constitute the privileging of the interests of one or more groups over others. The account which follows thus identifies key events, highlights how these key events are reported and interpreted by different types of actor, and seeks where appropriate to draw conclusions about the largely tacit promotion of interests within different types of historical account of the development of equestrian sport. Within this philosophical framework, we aim, in particular, to unpack explanations of the influence of the military on the early development of equestrian sport at the Olympic Games from 1900 - 1948.

The Socio-Historical Context of Equestrian Sport and Warfare at the Turn of the 19th Century

Analysis of the literature indicates that the only equestrian sport to have received significant attention by sports historians is horse racing. Horse racing is often used to epitomise high class social ideals, with the horse as a symbol of strength, power, wealth and even masculine identity.⁹ These issues have been addressed within the literature and whilst this does facilitate wider discourse about equestrian sport it is important to note that horse racing has never appeared in the modern Olympic programme. However, the socio-historical framing of horse racing does provide some context for discussion on other equestrian sports.

Outside of horse racing, other forms of equestrian sport have been somewhat neglected from a sport history perspective, indeed Kay¹⁰ conducted a survey of all major English language sports history journals over the previous twenty five years which revealed literature only pertaining to horse racing¹¹ with no reference to other equestrian sports.

Due to the lack of discourse surrounding the historical development of equestrian sports outside of horse racing, it is pertinent to provide a descriptive and chronological overview of the development of equestrian sport within the Olympics. However our aim is to register but also move beyond this descriptive analysis, to engage in a thematic analysis as we place the development of equestrian sport within the broader framework of changes to warfare and the military at the turn of the 19th Century.

The traditional use of horses in hunting and warfare has been well documented throughout history. The historical relationship between man and horse in warfare has, however, undoubtedly emerged from a male-dominated landscape and this is reflected in the gendered nature of the history of some equestrian sports. Indeed, even today the required clothing for equestrian sport competition symbolise formality and masculinity in reference to the strong historical links to the military and the hunting fields.¹² Sport, especially modern sport, in its ideal form as a cultural artefact and social institution, celebrates the supremacy of a particular culture through the representation of the ideal human, as manifested in the athletic competitor engaging in ritualised combat.¹³ The principal weapon of combat with which the ‘warrior’ vanquishes his opponent is the athlete’s body. The greater the reliance on the athlete’s body for victory and the more interactive the game activity, the higher the status of the sport and its competitors. Hence, traditional ‘male’ contact sports, such as rugby, football or field hockey are, according to Merlini¹⁴, considered ‘real’ sports in ways that motor racing, sailing and equestrian sports, such as polo, are not. It is interesting to note at this point that the terminology used to support the definition of ‘real’ sport, such as ‘warrior’, ‘combat’ and ‘male’, are indeed synonymous with the military, the root of equestrian sports.¹⁵

Equestrian sport requires equipment, and most fundamentally this is the horse. Whilst a horse cannot be designed or manufactured in the same way as a boat, equestrian sports require the breeding of quality horses, a lengthy process of selection, maturation and testing. In the nineteenth century breeding horses for sport and military purposes was regarded as one of the patriotic duties of an English gentleman and certainly the development of the English Thoroughbred had relied on English aristocracy to import the

foundation stock. In the nineteenth century sport horse breeding also provided a gateway to enter the highest echelons of British society, although it could be a high risk enterprise.¹⁶ The risk associated with breeding sport horses, with high financial investment required and a relatively low chance of return by production of a superior equine athlete, led to horse breeding being regarded as a leisure activity, even a sport, in its own right. Today many of these points still resonate with people joining syndicates to allow breeding and/or ownership of sport horses in order to join the elitist world of the ‘race horse or competition horse owner’. The upper class obsession with sport, as seen in literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, also led to as many divisions and rivalries as it did at times allow people to cross the social boundaries.¹⁷ For example Vamplew¹⁸ explores how sports used definitions of amateurism to exclude working men, with the Amateur Rowing Association providing an extreme example. They debarred from amateur status anyone ‘who is or has been by trade or employment for wages a mechanic, artisan, or labourer, or engaged in any menial duty’.¹⁹

Upper-class life in the nineteenth century was dominated by country or field sports, some involving horses, with literary celebrations of ‘the good rider to hounds or the top racehorse breeder’. Rivalries between hunts and even between traditional sports, such as polo, and new sports such as yachting or motor racing were often marked and bitter.²⁰ As with horse racing the socio-historical context of hunting has received academic attention, with many pointing out the apparent contradictions of a rural stewardship ideal welcoming in farmers and the rural community, however at the same time requiring ownership of substantial areas of land and considerable financial investment to support hunts.²¹

With sport horse breeding being dominated by the upper classes and the persistence in European sport of a Victorian ideal of amateurism into the mid-twentieth century it is perhaps unsurprising that equestrian sport in particular has been identified as an example of a sport governed by the Corinthian ideal. The characteristics synonymous with the ‘gentleman amateur or Corinthian’ of sport, seen as individuality, stoicism or courage, together with the preparedness to stand or fall by one’s own judgement and an

unwillingness to attribute personal misfortunes to the actions of others are characteristics seen to mirror the old military virtues of obedience, loyalty, manners and selflessness.²² Whilst in the nineteenth century many gentleman amateurs were skilful enough horsemen to compete against professionals, with the deaths of many officers in the Boer Wars and the abandonment of the hunters' flat race in the early twentieth century the numbers and levels of skill exhibited by amateurs waned. The high risk of serious injury or death and the increasing commercialisation of racing, with large funds for prizemoney, led to owners wanting only the best riders and increasingly these were full time professionals.²³ It is interesting to note that this trend is at odds with the experiences of athletes in other sports during this time where their amateur status was ruthlessly and religiously policed.

Understanding the socio-historical context of sports in the nineteenth century provides a lens through which one can appreciate the nature and significance of sport and its relationship to social values at this time. Indeed the emerging themes of 'manliness' of equestrian sport as epitomised by the required dominance over the horse, the influential presence of the upper classes, and the fact that equestrian sport has been identified as an example of a sport governed by the Corinthian ideal, are themes synonymous with the socio-historic context of European military at that time. Military training has always demanded physical fitness, the capacity for quick decisive action and, for many centuries, the ability to ride horses. The need to develop riding skills and maintain a cavalry in a state of readiness has shaped the evolution of horse-based sports. The horse-back pursuit of fox-hunting, for example, was valued by the Victorian military hierarchy and was an integral part of officer training in many European countries, for the cavalry regiments most highly regarded in terms of an upper-class military career.²⁴

Despite efforts to maintain cavalry readiness through equestrian sport, with the British government subsidising horse racing in the nineteenth century,²⁵ in the early 1900s the disappointing performance of the British military in The Boer War lead to a plethora of committees of inquiry and in many of these the Cavalry was found wanting.²⁶ At this time horses were still a major combat force and in the second Boer War (1899-1902) the British forces alone lost over 300,000 horses.²⁷ Lord Roberts, an artillery-man

and by the end of the second Boer War the Commander-in-Chief, called for a change in cavalry training and better management of the horses: 'It is not sufficient that (they) should be able to ride, but they must know how to get the best from their horses by good treatment and never-failing consideration of their wants...A man should be taught to ride as an individual, and, not as one of a squad, and the same with horse management.'²⁸

In 1903 Major-General (later Lieutenant-General the Lord) Robert Baden-Powell became Inspector General of Cavalry and chose to visit the French Cavalry School at Saumur and the Kaiser's at Hanover. These visits led to a programme of vigorous British reforms culminating with the foundation of a Cavalry School at Netheravon in Wiltshire in 1904.²⁹ Here officer training lasted eight months and covered all aspects of equitation and cavalry duties; the pre-eminence of the formal riding school diminished and a more practical approach to training was applied through more frequent manoeuvres in the field.³⁰ Hunting further honed the skills developed at Netheravon and required of the cavalry such as riding at speed over difficult terrain and negotiating natural obstacles.

Following the invention of gunpowder many armies had artillery batteries which required approximately 200 horses for six guns. This included riding horses for officers, surgeons and other support staff, as well as draft horses. Horse artillery was also used as a rapid response force, as at Waterloo, repulsing attacks and assisting the infantry.³¹ This role not only required great skill from the riders and a partnership with a well-trained mount to enable the negotiation of difficult terrain at speed, but also demanding patience and stealth when on reconnaissance. These skills had to be practised, by both mount and rider, in order that they could be deployed in the highly demanding and stressful environment of the battlefield. To this end cavalry (and other mounted) units practised drills and to increase the motivation to gain these skills competitions were held in the new wave of equestrian sports that had started to appear in the nineteenth century. One form of competition encompassed all three aspects: a demonstration of obedience and athleticism, dressage; a test of stamina, endurance and speed across varied terrain, the cross country; and a demonstration that the horse was still fit and agile after the exertions,

jumping. This competition took place over three days and acquired the name ‘The Military’, and would later be referred to as Eventing.³²

During the 20th century equestrian sport developed due to the training needs of the military and mirrored the aristocratic, upper-class, Eurocentric, male dominated zeitgeist of the Olympic Games.³³ Indeed the equestrian events chosen for inclusion in the modern Games were European riding disciplines with roots in classical horsemanship, fox hunting and tests of cavalry skills complementing the European Military influence seen elsewhere in the Olympic movement. Having reviewed the socio-historical context of warfare and the relationship between the military and equestrian sport, we now move on to further unpack the influence of the military on the first phase of development of equestrian sport within the context of the Olympics.

Military influences on the format and rules of equestrian sport at the Olympic Games from 1900 - 1948.

The strong influence of the military milieu, which had a distinctive masculine culture, undoubtedly shaped not only the male homogeneity between the institutional boundaries of the armed forces and associated sports, but also the innate class structure of such institutions. Indeed, this male homogeneity was clearly evident throughout the development of the Modern Games. From a governance and administrative perspective, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) evolved as a male-dominated institute. Between 1896 and 1948 the IOC had an all-male membership.³⁴ It is interesting to note however that the thirteen founding members whilst all male, represented eleven countries including the non-European countries of Russia, New Zealand, Argentina and America. They did not all have military backgrounds and the majority of members did not come from the upper classes. This male dominance transcended governance and was reflected in the restrictions placed on participation. The creator of the modern Olympics, De Coubertin himself, was opposed to female participation in public sport: ‘I personally do not approve of the participation of women in public competitions, which is not to say that they must abstain from practising a great number of sports, provided they do not make a

public spectacle of themselves. In the Olympic Games, as in the contests of former times, their primary role should be to crown the victors.’³⁵

The establishment of equestrian sports in the modern Olympic Games

Whilst 1896 was historic as the first Modern Olympics, it was not to be a memorable milestone for equestrian sport. The Greek organisers rejected plans to include equestrian sports in the programme of the I Olympiad owing to concerns regarding transporting horses, facilities and the preparations of competition sites.³⁶ The Games of the II Olympiad held in Paris in 1900 were a landmark in Olympic history for many reasons. Over a thousand competitors, from 24 nations, took part in 19 different sports.³⁷ Equestrianism as a sport made its debut at the summer Olympics in 1900 with competitors representing five nations (three European, Russia and the United States); Great Britain did not however compete in the three equestrian individual disciplines officially represented in the 1900 Games in Paris.³⁸ They were not the same disciplines as in the current competition. Showjumping, as we refer to it today was split into ‘jumping’, ‘high jump’ and ‘long jump’ and formed the first three recognized equestrian Olympic disciplines. The Italian rider Giovanni Giorgio Trissino won gold in ‘high jump’ and silver in ‘long jump’. Competing with two different horses in the high jump, he narrowly missed making Olympic history by winning two medals in the same event having won the gold medal and finishing in 4th place on his second horse.³⁹

Despite the male domination described above women took part in the Games for the first time in selected events, for example Charlotte Cooper from Middlesex, England, became the first female Olympic champion in the sport of tennis. Although Elvira Guerra from France competed in the equestrian discipline of ‘Hacks and Hunters combined’⁴⁰ it is important to note that the latter event was part of the World Exhibition of 1900 and was not therefore an event officially recognized as being formally part of the Olympic Games.⁴¹

Polo was also introduced to the 1900 Olympics, but according to IOC records was classified separately from the other equestrian disciplines.⁴² Eight separate polo tournaments were held in this year, but only the Grand Prix Internationale de l'Exposition was counted as an official medal event. Entries for this event were from clubs rather than countries and the winning Foxhunters Club comprised English, Irish and American players (all male).⁴³ Polo also appeared at the 1908 Olympics, here teams represented nations and the Hurlingham Club team from Great Britain won the gold medal. Whilst records do not state if the riders were military officers, the official report of these Games shows all polo officials were high ranking military officers.⁴⁴ The next appearance of polo was at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp where Great Britain retained the gold medal title.⁴⁵ However in the two further appearances of polo at the Olympics, this honor would be claimed consecutively by Argentina, although Britain did gain bronze in 1924 and silver in 1936.⁴⁶ The discipline of polo was therefore only contested in five Olympiads (although not consistently) before being removed from the official programme after the 1936 Games in Berlin.⁴⁷ Polo is therefore known as a "discontinued sport" or "past Olympic sport".

The Swedish cavalry officer, Master of the Horse to the King of Sweden and IOC member Count Clarence von Rosen had long argued that, by the inclusion of military representatives, the Olympic Games would be strengthened and the various governments would show more interest. Baron de Coubertin and many IOC members were supportive and asked von Rosen to present a proposal for horse competitions.⁴⁸ During the years leading up to World War I the links between sport and the preparedness to perform in military fields were socially accepted, and indeed promoted as proof of national superiority. Horse-riding in particular was regarded as a military discipline.⁴⁹ The organisers of the 1908 Olympic Games in London were responsive and agreed to place horse-riding competitions on the programme. However, the British Olympic Council was not able to arrange the horse-riding competitions in the stadium. Consequently, the newly-created Olympia Horse Show was contacted and agreed to hold the competitions in the Olympia Hall. Unfortunately, when eight nations entered a total of 88 competitors the Olympia board found itself unable to carry out the programme due to the

unexpectedly large number of entries.⁵⁰ However, Swedish influence prevailed. The Games of the V Olympiad were awarded to Stockholm; their bid contained a proposal to hold equestrian events and, as a result, these Games would prove to be a milestone in the continuing development of equestrian sport at the Olympics.

1912: The Pivotal Games

One military-influenced legacy still prevalent today is related to the actual events which athletes participate in. The Swedish Organising Committee realised that only a few international federations existed, without universally accepted rules. It therefore adopted the following procedure: if there were rules of an international sports federation or if there were rules adopted internationally, they would be used, such as for cycling, football, tennis, swimming or yachting. If such universally accepted rules did not exist, such as in equestrian sport and modern pentathlon, the Swedish Organising Committee would draw up the rules for the Games of 1912.⁵¹ For example, in Modern Pentathlon there were no rules stating that women couldn't compete but when a young British athlete, Helen Preece (described by de Coubertin, the then President of the IOC, as a 'neo-Amazonian') applied to compete in the Stockholm Games the Swedish Olympic Committee chose to reject her registration.⁵²

Consequently, cavalryman Count Von Rosen came up with the three discipline set-up which is the Olympic equestrian programme still in force today: Eventing (the Military) Dressage (Prize Riding), and Showjumping (Prize Jumping).⁵³ Von Rosen's influence is such that he is often referred to as the 'Father of Modern Olympic Equestrian Competition'.⁵⁴ He discarded the then popular 'high-jump' competition because it was mostly professional not military riders who were involved. With reference to this differentiation between military and 'professional' riders, Von Rosen's disregard for professional disciplines mirrors the wider changes across the Olympic movement between 1908 and 1912. During a meeting of the IOC in Luxemburg on the 11th June 1910 it had been determined that only medals and no money prizes were to be awarded

during all Olympic competitions. Therefore the 1912 Olympic Games were the first international equestrian competition with no money prizes, although three of the four Olympic Challenge Prizes were awarded in the equestrian disciplines from the monarchs of Germany, Austria and Italy.⁵⁵

The equestrian organising committee in Stockholm consisted entirely of military officers or members of the aristocracy. The military influence on these games is further evident in Von Rosen's rules for Eventing in which it clearly states that competitors must be actively serving officers. Eventing is the equestrian equivalent of the triathlon, incorporating three disciplines designed to mirror the challenges faced by the cavalry.⁵⁶ Cavalry horses had to be all round performers, agile over obstacles and all kinds of terrain, highly responsive and obedient. To test these skills Eventing included a non-jumping endurance test (road and tracks), a speed test (the individual steeplechase), a cross-country jumping course, a stadium jumping course and a dressage test. Eventing was originally only open to active duty military officers, and their mounts had to belong to the competitors themselves or to their respective branch of service. Military owned school horses were ineligible for competition.⁵⁷ This characteristic of equestrian sports was reinforced in discussions leading up to the introduction of the modern pentathlon to the Olympic programme in 1912. There was extensive debate as to whether competitors in the modern pentathlon would ride their own horses or be provided with them, and this centred around a difference of opinion around increasing participation to all social classes. The IOC session in Luxembourg in June 1910 agreed that saddled horses would be provided in support of de Coubertin's vision of modern pentathlon being a combined sport which happened to feature an equestrian element, open to all. However the Swedish Olympic Committee overturned this decision in 1911 requesting that all competitors bring their own horses, with von Rosen promoting modern pentathlon as primarily an equestrian sport. In the end competitors could choose to either bring their own horse or have one provided. This was soon revised to everyone having one provided in the pursuit of parity and since this time modern pentathlon has not been considered an equestrian sport, although its promotion of a masculine and military ideal was a key reason for its introduction and continued place within the Olympic programme.⁵⁸

The 'officer only' rule seen in Eventing did not apply to the other equestrian disciplines however it is interesting to note that the official report from these games makes it clear that all equestrian competitors were military officers.⁵⁹ The three discipline format has been consistent, apart from the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp which saw the introduction and only appearance of Equestrian Vaulting. In 1920 this was known as 'Artistic Riding' and was open to non-commissioned cavalry officers. The gold medal was won by the Belgian team, followed by France and Sweden.⁶⁰ Equestrian Vaulting was utilised by many military training schools to improve their riders and Sweden was obviously very accomplished at this sport. It is therefore not clear why von Rosen elected not to include Equestrian Vaulting in the 1912 Games, or indeed why it failed to appear again.

In 1911, invitations were sent out to National Olympic Committees and interestingly also to their military departments. As mentioned Von Rosen had shaped and endorsed the new format of the equestrian programme with an upper-class touch, in which only military officers on active duty were allowed to compete in the Eventing competition.⁶¹ The fact that the competing athletes were officers on active duty meant they had little time to prepare for competition. For example, the USA's preparations began on 20 January 1912 when the war department published Special Order No.20 detailing selected officers to constitute an equestrian team to compete in that summer's Olympiad in Stockholm.⁶² The team had just six months to prepare before setting sail to Sweden in June.

In preparation for the Stockholm Olympics the American team based themselves at the US Army Mounted Service School at Fort Riley, Kansas (so named from 1905 to 1920 and then known as the Cavalry School from 1920 to 1947).⁶³ DiMarco a modern US armoured cavalry man and military historian explains that during this time about fifty five officers a year attended Fort Riley, and for them horses were not just about the military or sport but were an integral part of their lifestyle: 'It was not uncommon for them to be in the saddle for eight or twelve hours a day for weeks at a time if they were in the field or doing some kind of mounted training. On weekends they

did foxhunts, horse shows, drag hunts, polo. Their kids rode; their wives rode. Most of the cavalry officers owned one or two horses privately, in addition to their Army-provided troop horses.⁶⁴

From the fifty plus officers, five were selected to train for the Olympics alongside eighteen horses. Time to competition was not the only challenge the American team faced, they had only 90 minutes a day in which to train outside of their regular military duties and obligations, they were in the middle of a severe Midwestern winter and whilst the officers had competition experience in Showjumping they had no experience of the European sports of Dressage and Eventing.⁶⁵ Despite their familiarity with horses their lack of experience with the demands of Olympic style competition would have made preparation very difficult for the American team.

Ten nations and sixty two horse and rider partnerships took part in the equestrian programme at the 1912 Games. Seven European countries, Russia, Chile and the United States were represented. Whilst Great Britain entered teams and individuals for all equestrian medal competitions, they only actually competed in Eventing withdrawing from the other disciplines.⁶⁶ The host nation Sweden dominated the medal table, taking all three medals in the individual dressage, individual and team gold in Eventing and team gold in Showjumping. Germany and France also performed well with Germany taking three silvers and a bronze and France securing a gold, silver and bronze across the different disciplines.

For the first time the Olympic Games had athletic representation from all five continents, however the European dominance within the medals, seen in the equestrian sports was to some extent mirrored across the Stockholm Games in general. The anomaly was USA who gained the most gold medals of all nations and won the team bronze medal in the 1912 Eventing competition. Whilst other non-European countries, such as Russia, had a strong and active cavalry during this time their failure to medal reflected their lack of experience with the Eurocentric style of competition introduced at the 1912 Olympic Games, particularly in Dressage.⁶⁷

Seven nations were represented in the 1912 team Eventing competition, with each team represented by four officers; the competition included a 50-kilometre distance ride and a cross-country ride with obstacles.⁶⁸ The team from Great Britain consisted of one Colonel and three Lieutenants from the 4th Hussars, 16th Lancers and the 18th Hussars.⁶⁹ Considering their lack of preparation and experience in Eventing combined with their extensive travel requirements (a 15 day journey from New York to Stockholm) the US team took home a very respectable team bronze medal. Whilst competitors were similar in gender, rank and active service, the European distinctive riding style and quality of horse differentiated the teams. Lieutenant Colonel F.S. Fontz, the general staff officer responsible for overseeing the American team effort, stated that the quality of the US horses was a national embarrassment and that Captain Henry (Team Captain) and his men were physically exhausted by the pace of training while simultaneously continuing to perform their assigned military duties.⁷⁰ The Swedish performance, however, received high praise. The German sporting advocate Carl Diem was so impressed by the Swedish performance, he wrote, *'What Swedish officers showed was representative of military riding, an honorable work'*.⁷¹ Diem, however, went on to question whether equestrianism should be an Olympic sport because, in his view, only a person and his or her achievements and capabilities should be evaluated.

The 1916 scheduled Games were cancelled due to the onset of World War 1 in 1914. During this break in competition, changes within the military, such as the increase in mechanised and armoured vehicles and the trench conditions experienced during the First World War, would prove to have a lasting effect on the military's influence over equestrian sport at the Olympics. The 'Great Cavalry Debate' which had been brewing since the Boer War had continued to gain momentum. There was criticism within the British military that mechanisation did not occur soon enough due to the 'cavalry's irrational attachment to their horses'.⁷² The questionable quality and reliability of early tanks during the First World War, gave horses a revised reconnaissance role. One of the main driving forces behind the mechanisation of the cavalry was the Chancellor of the Exchequer Winston Churchill, who himself had been a cavalry officer.⁷³ Churchill called

for the cavalry to be abolished or mechanised, subsequently the War Office began mechanising the regular cavalry in 1928.⁷⁴ However although the phasing out of the formal mounted cavalry began during the early part of the 20th Century, military influence on equestrian sport would continue.

Olympic Equestrian Sport between the World Wars

The Games continued after the First World War and the European dominance of equestrian events at the Olympics continued. The only non-European countries to gain a medal in the equestrian sports between 1920 and 1928 were Chile (officers based at the German cavalry school in Hannover), USA, Argentina, Japan and Mexico. Because of the end to World War I in 1918, Antwerp was only awarded the Games a year prior to the start of competition. The short-term allocation of the Games to Antwerp obviously left little time for preparation. Just eight nations entered the equestrian competitions at the 1920 Games in Antwerp and Great Britain was represented only in the Polo competition. The Swedish team picked up more than half the 15 medals at stake, and confirmed their dominance of the sport. Team USA was at first unable to gain a passage to Europe at such a late stage, but again military influence came to the fore as they were able to secure the help of the military to transport the team. However, the proposed steamer was damaged at the last minute and the team finally sailed in a much smaller ship which arrived one week later, on 8 August, barely a week before competition began.⁷⁵ The US team, perhaps unsurprisingly, were unable to repeat the success of the Stockholm Games finishing outside the medals.

Military influence continued to shape equestrian sport beyond the Olympics. Following the 1920 Olympics, the IOC called for an extraordinary meeting in 1921 in Lausanne. As a result, several international federations were founded, including the world-wide Federation Equestrian Internationale (FEI).⁷⁶ The FEI, although with only 14 member National Federations, had in the two years since its founding drawn up the Olympic programme. This task was helped by the fact that the FEI's Secretary General, Commandant Georges Hector, was also the Secretary General of the French Federation

and became the president of the technical committee for the equestrian events at the 1924 Games.⁷⁷ Today, the FEI is the sole controlling authority for eight equestrian disciplines and is the only international federation to govern and regulate a sport for both able-bodied and disabled athletes.

At this point it is interesting to note that the three equestrian disciplines of Eventing, Dressage and Showjumping under the guidance of the FEI had different rules regarding the participation of female riders. Women were not permitted to compete in any equestrian sport at the Olympics until 1952 when they were allowed to compete only in Dressage; in 1956 Showjumping was opened to female competitors; and in 1964 they were finally allowed to compete in the military dominated Eventing competition.⁷⁸ However, outside of the Olympics women were successfully competing in equestrian events alongside male competitors. Under the 1938 FEI rules, Dressage was open to military officers and amateurs, under which category women could compete, however Rule 214 stated that Amazons (women riders) could not participate in the equestrian events at the Olympic Games (Burke, 1997).⁷⁹ If they qualified, women could however compete in all other international competitions recognized by the FEI and in order to strengthen the male only Olympic national teams, successful female riders were asked to lend the 'team' their horses.

In 1924 the Games were hosted in Paris, the home city of Pierre de Coubertin. These Games are commonly regarded as the Games that established the Olympics as a 'spectacle', with a closing ceremony, an athlete village and over one thousand journalists in attendance. Forty four nations and over three thousand athletes competed in Paris; seventeen nations competed in the equestrian programme and the medals were distributed across nine different nations, including for the first time medals for the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Poland and Portugal.⁸⁰ Great Britain competed in Eventing, Show Jumping and Polo; whilst a bronze medal was secured in polo, they narrowly missed out, coming fourth, in both the Showjumping and Eventing team competitions.⁸¹

The 1928 Games held in Amsterdam saw three additional nations compete in the equestrian programme and Czechoslovakia and Spain medaled for the first time. Twenty nations were represented within the equestrian events; including for the first time Japan. Although Great Britain entered the Olympics they did not field a team for the equestrian events. Major Sloan Doak, a veteran of the 1920 and 1924 US Olympic teams received orders to prepare a US equestrian team just eight months before the Games although the team was only assembled to start training just three months before they set sail to Holland.⁸² The US failed to medal at the 1928 Games and their poor performance resulted in a shake up of how the Army selected, trained and fielded Olympic equestrian teams. Doak's observations of the European model of training and success prompted him to make recommendations that the cavalry begin planning for the 1932 Games immediately after the conclusion of the Amsterdam Olympics. For the first time since the 1904 Games in St Louis, the Games of the X Olympiad (1932) were held outside Europe, in Los Angeles, California. These Games would prove to be a milestone for the USA in relation to their participation in equestrian sport at the Olympics. The effect of hosting the Games is reflected in the USA equestrian teams' preparation for the competition, which for the first time began four years before competition with training starting two years out.⁸³ The military's involvement in the equestrian competition went beyond individual competitors as the US Army, in particular the cavalry, was also responsible for organizing and operating the equestrian events.

Between 1928 and 1932, other changes also occurred in the US Army which would serve to improve the quality and subsequent results for the host nation's equestrian Olympic team. Changes to their horse-breeding programme, the formation of a Cavalry School at Fort Riley and the introduction of a one year advanced course in equitation helped focus training and preparation for Olympic competition. The captain of the 1912 USA Olympic team, General Henry was appointed as Chief of Cavalry; he was also a member of the IOC and in 1931 became President of the FEI.⁸⁴

Location of the Games outside of Europe, coupled with the fact that the 1932 Olympics were held in the middle of the Great Depression resulted in only half as many

athletes taking part as had done so in 1928. The great absentees in equestrian sport at Los Angeles were Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Poland and Czechoslovakia.⁸⁵ In total, 37 nations competed in the 1932 Olympics, but only six nations (not including Great Britain) competed in equestrian events. France only sent a Dressage team; Netherlands only sent Eventers and, whilst Sweden was fully represented, to save money, the Eventing riders also had to do the Showjumping competition. In addition there were Mexicans – who had the shortest journey and an Eventer and Showjumping rider from Japan. The US had full representation. As a result of this concerted effort the host nation secured five medals. This was a feat which remained unmatched for over fifty years, until the Games returned to Los Angeles in 1984.⁸⁶

Military influence continued to be evident in the 1936 Games where all the judges in the equestrian and Polo competitions were military officers.⁸⁷ Despite a cultural tradition of equestrian sports and a strong cavalry presence, Great Britain failed to make an impact on equestrian sport in the Olympics until the 1936 Games in Berlin where they medalled for the first time, taking home a bronze in the team Eventing: ‘The English horses had not yet had enough dressage training, but distinguished themselves on the terrain through their tremendous galloping and jumping ability. For this reason they were able to take third place in the team contest. The English officers rode wonderfully on the terrain’.⁸⁸

As the Games had returned to Europe, America was unable to retain their success gaining only a silver medal in the individual Eventing competition. Whilst the rest of the Berlin Games was marred by political unrest there was also disquiet within the equestrian community as for the first and only time in Olympic history, one country, the host country Germany, captured all six equestrian gold medals despite the fact that twenty one nations competed across all disciplines. In his official post-Olympic report for the US equestrian team, to Major General Guy Henry, Captain Hiram Tuttle wrote, ‘I had been advised by the German team coach that to win in dressage required European-bred horses, European competition experience, and political clout in the host country; and that, having none of these, the Americans likely wouldn’t fare well.’⁸⁹

Between the two World Wars the 'Great Cavalry Debate' continued with passionate support on both sides. Again it was the anthro-zoological relationship between man and horse which divided the debate. In the House of Commons in March 1935 Brigadier H. Clifton-Brown, a pre-war commander of the 12th Lancers, lamented that 'I am sorry that we cannot go on clinging to the horse, but I hope we shall cling to him as long as we can'.⁹⁰ During World War II the Games again lapsed while people and horses were deployed. Although horses still had military uses during the early part of the Second World War their role in warfare had been irrevocably altered. Many of these new roles utilized the mobility of mounted divisions, over difficult terrain, which increased the requirement for skilled and practised riders and horses. These roles made equestrian sport competitions for military participants more important than ever before, and particularly the cross country element of eventing.⁹¹

All British Army cavalry regiments were mechanized by 1st March 1942 when the Queen's Own Yorkshire Dragoons (Yeomanry) were converted to a motorized role, following mounted service against the Vichy French in Syria the previous year. The final cavalry charge by British Empire forces occurred on 21st March 1942 when a 60 strong patrol of the Burma Frontier Force encountered Japanese infantry near Toungoo airfield in central Burma. The U.S. Army's last horse cavalry actions were also fought during WWII. Two years after the British Cavalry was mechanized the last horsed U.S. Cavalry (the Second Cavalry Division) were dismounted. The last substantive and successful classical cavalry charge of the war - and the final such confirmed charge in history - was probably that made in August 1942 by a cavalry unit of the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia (*Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia*, or CSIR) on the Eastern Front.⁹² As the role of the horse in warfare diminished, this was echoed by the twilight of military dominance over equestrian sports at the Olympic Games.

The 1948 Controversy

The 1948 Olympics in London were organised with less than two years' notice and took place when rations were still in place and London was still recovering from the scars of World War II. The FEI held a view that some of the nations involved in the recent World

War may still have been recovering and consequently their cavalry mounts may have had insufficient training in the Olympic Equestrian disciplines to engage successfully in challenges comparable to those of 1936. Therefore, the dressage test was modified to remove the Piaffe and Passage (the most complicated required moves of dressage) and the endurance test was shortened. For the first time at any Olympic Games, Great Britain fielded a Dressage team although they failed to medal in either individual or team competition. Great Britain did however medal in both team Eventing and Showjumping competitions with bronze medals in both.⁹³

Whilst the equestrian organising committee was predominantly composed of military officers these were the last Games to accommodate male-only cavalry officers in equestrian disciplines, including the pentathlon. The military dominance over the sport was to end in a flourish of controversy. In order to abide by the IOC ruling relating to amateur competition (at that time) equestrian competitors had to be recognised by a National Body as ‘gentlemen’ or they had to be a ‘professional officers actively serving’.⁹⁴ In the build-up to the 1948 Games a sergeant in the Swedish Army, Gehnäll Persson, was a top contender for the Swedish Dressage team; unfortunately, at the time, however, he was a non-commissioned officer. Sergeant Persson was, on 20 July 1948 (barely three weeks before the Olympic Grand Prix de Dressage) promoted to Lieutenant and, as expected, Sweden won the Dressage gold medal. Shockingly, however, merely two and half weeks later, Persson was demoted. In retrospect it seems unbelievable that the Swedish military authorities naively thought that such a scandal would not become known internationally. When it was discovered, the FEI, with the approval of the IOC, disqualified Persson. This meant that Sweden was also disqualified from the team event and lost its gold medal. This shameful incident was a clear demonstration that times had changed and commissioned officers were no less likely to be professional equestrian athletes than non-commissioned officers. Following this incident the FEI acted quickly and, from 1952, allowed non-commissioned officers in the Olympics.⁹⁵ The time of military dominance over Olympic equestrian events was over, ushering in the second period of development for equestrian sport at the Olympics, characterised by the inclusion of non-military and female riders.

Conclusion

Pre-1900 equestrian sport existed in various forms around the world primarily to develop and practice skills of hunting and warfare. At this time equestrian sport lacked clear governance and rules, was certainly not internationally standardised and was across the board male dominated. However, the inclusion of this sport within the Olympic programme from 1900 significantly influenced the regulation of equestrian disciplines, the legacy of which is still evident today. Despite the relevance of this period with regard to the development of equestrian sport, it has to date been overlooked by sport historians and academic literature. This paper therefore contributes to filling this recognised gap in the literature by evaluating the influence of the military on the first phase of development of equestrian sport in the Olympic Games.

Within a thematic analysis we have been able to highlight influential military developments / changes that occurred outside of the confines of sport, and we have placed the socio-cultural development of equestrianism within this framework. Developing the analysis using a reconstructive approach has enabled us to highlight the relevance of the military influence on the development of Olympic equestrian sport. And through the identification and analysis of perceptions of equestrianism which, within the context of the Olympics, are centred upon the Eurocentric, military-influenced development of the sport, we have also been able to discuss implicit and explicit references to, and relevance of, masculinity elitism and social class, along with issues of amateurism and professionalism.

Understanding the socio-historical context of sports in the nineteenth century provides a lens through which one can appreciate the historical landscape of sport and society at this time. Key themes emerging from the review of the socio-historical context of equestrian sport are the ‘manliness’ of the sport as epitomised in the dominance over the horse, and the changing face of the influence of the upper classes. Through the influence of the military these themes continued to shape equestrian sport defining its regulation, organisation and participation. We believe analysis of this original

equestrian-focussed discourse contributes to wider sport history debates by providing a sport-specific narrative for a sport which has developed ironically from a hyper-masculine, military context to one which would come to manifest unique characteristics of competition across gender and age based divisions.

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